

## ***The Master of the Fogg Pietà ~ Maestro di Figline Project***

Austin Nevin, April 2009

### **Introduction**

The *Master of the Fogg Pietà ~ Maestro di Figline Project* (MFPMP) was launched in July 2008 and is expected to be completed in 2010. The MFPMP focuses on a group of related but dispersed works by the Master of the Fogg Pietà (also known as the Maestro di Figline), a little-studied artist, active in Florence and Assisi, c.1310 – c.1330, who “is regarded by many critics as one of the major figures in the history of Trecento painting.”<sup>1</sup>

With the aim of fostering exchange and scholarly research, the project has concentrated work on various paintings by the Master which may have come from the same altarpiece and which are now in museums, institutes and private collections in Europe and the United States. These paintings include: the artist’s name panel, the *Pietà* in the Harvard University Art Museums, and works in London (Courtauld Gallery: *St. Lawrence*; Private Collection on loan to Courtauld Gallery: *Bishop Saint*); Avignon (Musée du Petit Palais: *God the Father*); Parma (Magnani Rocca Foundation: *Saint John the Baptist*); Rome (Private Collections: *Saint Peter*, *Saint James Major*, *Saint Cosmas or Damian* (?); *Bishop Saint*); ‘s Heerenbergh (C. J. H. Van Heek Collection: *Saint Paul* and *Saint Lucy*); and Worcester, MA (Worcester Art Museum: *Saint Francis* and *Saint Philip*).

Coordinated by The Courtauld Institute of Art, in partnership with the Harvard Art Museums, the Worcester Art Museum, the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence, and the Instituut Collectie Nederland, Amsterdam, the MFPMP has set out to establish an open source online tool for collaborative research that will enable international partners to easily share technical, archival and art-historical information via a website. The internet based research tool will be launched soon at: [www.mfpmfp.org](http://www.mfpmfp.org).

In addition to a reconsideration of the proposed reconstruction of the altarpiece, work on the website and between partners aims to improve the understanding of this enigmatic Master’s working practice within, and beyond, the panels of this group. Hence, investigations are also currently underway on panels which include the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* in the Collegiata of Figline Val d’Arno, and the Master’s great crucifix in S. Croce, Florence.

### **Selected Insights into the Master’s working practice**

Various aspects of the Master’s painting technique, and the relationship between the panels have been examined and discussed in ongoing research, two examples of which are given here. First, the Master’s small oeuvre is notable for its inclusion of stained glass design, as well as works on panel and in fresco, and his surviving paintings demonstrate his connections with Umbria and Florence, and his imitation of certain Sienese decorative techniques.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while it has been suggested that the Worcester panels can be dated to ca. 1340, through comparison with motif punches used by Pietro Lorenzetti, the technique of freehand incised patterns, reserved against a granulated background, and the repertoire of geometrical shapes, may point, instead, to the influence of Lippo Memmi and Simone Martini, in their work from ca. 1320. High resolution images of the punch work from the Worcester panels are particularly important for such comparisons and have recently been added to the growing online material. Second, the unusual flesh painting seems a characteristic feature of the Master’s technique: the customary greenish under layer of terra verde or verdaccio is omitted, and facial modelling is achieved through mixing some carbon black with the final layers of pink flesh paint, combined with some yellow glazing to create shadows in the eye socket and around

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<sup>1</sup> M. Boskovits, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting*, III, ix, Florence 1984, pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> J. Cannon, in “Giotto e il Trecento. Il più Sovrano Maestro stato in dipintura” Exhibition catalogue, Skira, 2009.

the nose and jaw. Technical analysis of paintings, including the careful comparison of X-radiographs, infrared reflectograms, and X-ray fluorescence analysis of pigments and the preparation of cross-sections of carefully selected samples has highlighted parallels between the panels, which continue to provoke exchange and discussion among partners.

### **The Research Website**

The MFPMFP website has been created to emulate and facilitate the experience of gathering the relevant paintings, and the conservators and curators who study them in the same place. Materials being gathered on the site include new high resolution images of the paintings (IR, visible and X-radiographs); selected analysis of pigments using a range of non-destructive techniques, as well as micrographs from cross-sections and data associated with the analysis of binding media. An important aspect of the research has focused on the comparison of conservation documentation, information from previous technical studies, and archival photographs from the various partners and paintings. Conservation, curatorial and technical work, scientific data and art historical materials are being assembled online, with the intention to provide the most thorough and appropriate selection of materials for current and future scholarly research.

A major element in the ongoing development of the research tool for the MFPMFP has been the careful choice and integration of various open source tools for the creation of an easily accessible forum which can be utilized and exploited by partners for information gathering, exchange and dialogue. For the project, various software components have been adapted, and 12 standard open-source packages have been assembled: each is (in our opinion) the best available in its class. Thus, extra software development has been minimized, and work has focused on add-ons for IIPImage, for which new plug-ins have been released under an open source license. Particularly important within the short timeframe of the pilot project has been the rapid development of the website, and long-term maintenance is expected to be minimal. The underlying software tool developed as part of the MFPMFP is easy to share and all parts of the system are free and open. System documentation will be freely available on the website.

Therefore, while the focus of the pilot MFPMFP has been research on the Master, this project does not simply concern a single artist and some of his works. The intention is that this project should serve as a pilot for online international collaborative research amongst museums curators, conservators and art historians, offering a working model for other comparable research-based websites, combining visual documentation and other data on related works from a variety of sources.

### **Project team members and institutions**

The Courtauld Institute of Art: Austin Nevin, Coordinator & Mellon Fellow, Aviva Burnstock, Joanna Cannon, Caroline Campbell, Clare Richardson,

John Cupitt, external consultant

Harvard Art Museums: Lauren Cox, Teri Hensick, Narayan Khandakhar, Henry Lie, Katherine Olivier, Stephan Wolohojian

Worcester Art Museum: Rita Albertson, Philip Klausmeyer, Winifred Murray, Birgit Strähle

Instituut Collectie Nederland: Luc Megens , Klaas Jan Van den Berg

Opificio delle Pietre Dure: Roberto Bellucci, Ciro Castelli, Cecilia Frosinini